

An Exploration of the Reader's Bill of Rights

Laurie Elish-Piper, Mona W. Matthews, Jerry L. Johns, Victoria J. Risko

Issues of democracy are prevalent in educational journals and discussions (Beane, 1998; Fleischer & Schaafsma, 1998). While most educators support the notion that democracy is an integral part and important goal of the public schooling system in the United States, less agreement appears to be present regarding the rights and responsibilities of learners within democratic classrooms and schools (Fleischer & Schaafsma, 1998). More specifically, what rights and responsibilities do learners, teachers, and readers have? All of these issues are embedded within the current political climate wherein state and local mandates are dictating what teachers can teach, and in some cases, how they teach it. This in turn, greatly influences the rights that students have within classrooms. All of these issues challenge teachers and teacher educators to examine what they believe and value in learning and reading.

In his book, *Better than Life*, Daniel Pennac (1994) examines how his son changed from an enthusiastic young reader to a reluctant teenage reader. Pennac ponders how this unfortunate turn of events occurred, and he concludes that well-meaning parents and teachers often limit the choices and rights of readers, thus making reading a negative experience. In his book, Pennac proposes a Reader's Bill of Rights. The Reader's Bill of Rights states that readers have:

1. The right to not read.
2. The right to skip pages.
3. The right to not finish.
4. The right to reread.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to escapism.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to browse.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right to not defend your tastes. (Pennac, 1994, pp. 170-171)

As teacher educators, the authors of this paper began to wonder about the appropriateness and usefulness of the Reader's Bill of Rights. Did Pennac's Bill of Rights offer a vehicle for helping teachers examine their beliefs about reading and readers? Did this Bill of Rights offer a tool for asserting what we, as teacher educators, believe and hope to nurture within our students? As Carolyn Panofsky argued in her presentation at the 1998 American Reading Forum Conference, literacy is a series of value commitments (Panofsky, 1998). We wondered if teachers and future teachers viewed literacy as a personal and professional commitment. We

questioned if teachers felt that they had rights as readers? Did they exercise the rights that Pennac proposed? Did they feel these rights applied to other readers, including their students?

Based on this framework and the associated questions, we undertook a pilot study with teachers and preservice teachers at our universities and then engaged American Reading Forum conference participants in a Problems Court Session focusing on the Reader's Bill of Rights.

The Pilot Study: Research Perspectives and Questions

As teacher educators, we wondered how teachers would respond to the Reader's Bill of Rights. For example, do inservice and preservice teachers feel the rights describe them as readers? Do inservice and preservice teachers agree or disagree with the rights? A pilot study was undertaken to examine these questions and gather more insight into teacher beliefs and practices associated with the Reader's Bill of Rights.

The Pilot Study: Methodology

We created a survey (Appendix A) and administered it to a total of 131 educators who were enrolled in courses at the institutions where we teach in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States. The respondents ranged from preservice teachers seeking initial certification to inservice teachers pursuing graduate degrees. Tables 1 and 2 provide information about the respondents.

Table 1

Degrees Sought by Respondents

Degree Sought	Number of Respondents
Bachelor's Degree	16
Master's Degree	71
Educational Specialist Degree	9
No Degree Sought	15
No Response	20

N = 131

Table 2

Professional Positions or Goals of Respondents

Professional Position or Goal	Number of Respondents
-------------------------------	-----------------------

Elementary Teacher	86
Middle School Teacher	7
Secondary Teacher	2
Special Education Teacher	7
Other	9
No Response	20

N = 131

The surveys asked respondents to react to each statement in terms of “how much the phrase was like you?” and “to what degree do you agree or disagree with each phrase.” Percentages were calculated for each item. The percentages were also compared with demographic information such as degree sought and professional position or goal to determine if there were patterns associated with certain groups of respondents.

Results of the Pilot Study

Overall, respondents tended to agree that the positive statements in the Bill of Rights were “very much” or “much like” themselves. By positive statements, we mean the statements that focus on the positive aspects of reading that educators tend to encourage readers to do. We have classified the following statements as positive statements: The right to reread, the right to read anything, the right to escapism, the right to read anywhere, and the right to browse. In response to these statements, those surveyed overwhelmingly indicated that these statements were “very much” or “much like” themselves with percentages ranging from 67% up to 88%.

On the other hand, respondents tended to have less agreement that the negative statements in the Bill of Rights described them. We identified negative statements as those which described reading behaviors that educators tend to discourage readers from doing. We classified the following statements as negative statements: The right to not read, the right to skip pages, and the right to not finish. From 31% to 43% of respondents indicated that these statements were “very much” or “much like” themselves. A summary of this information is provided in Table 3.

The only real surprise in these results was that 35% of the respondents indicated that the right to not read was “very much” or “much like” themselves. Since follow-up questions or interviews were not included in the pilot study, we were unable to determine why these respondents did not read. Furthermore, we were unable to learn if this behavior was characteristic of all reading situations or related only course readings since all respondents were enrolled in a university course at the time of the pilot study.

In addition, another interesting finding was that respondents tended to indicate that the rights to not read, skip pages, and not finish did not describe them, but they rated these statements higher in terms of other reader’s rights in these areas. This finding caused the researchers to question whether respondents replied about themselves as they thought the researchers would want them to reply, or if the respondents had not given themselves permission to engage in what they may have perceived as negative reading behaviors.

Table 3**Summary of Responses to “Very Much Like Me” and “Like Me” Statements**

Statement of Right	Percentage of Respondents indicating “Very Much Like Me” and “Like Me”
The right to not read.	35%
The right to skip pages.	31%
The right to not finish.	43%
The right to reread.	70%
The right to read anything.	86%
The right to escapism.	67%
The right to read anywhere.	88%
The right to browse.	87%
The right to read out loud.	57%
The right to not defend your tastes.	56%

The second portion of the survey asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements. Overwhelmingly, respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with all of the statements except the right to not read. On this statement, 51% of the respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement, indicating that almost an equal number of respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement. A summary of these results is provided in Table 4.

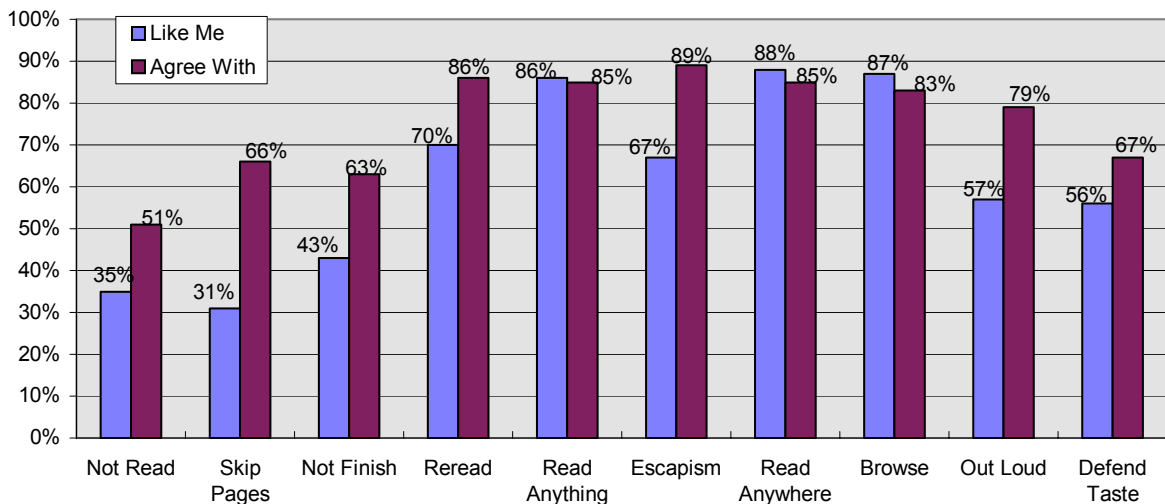
Table 4**Summary of Responses to “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” Statements**

Statement of Right	Percentage of Respondents indicating “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”
The right to not read.	51%
The right to skip pages.	66%
The right to not finish.	63%

The right to reread.	86%
The right to read anything.	85%
The right to escapism.	89%
The right to read anywhere.	85%
The right to browse.	83%
The right to read out loud.	79%
The right to not defend your tastes.	67%

Overall, no clear patterns existed within specific groups of respondents. For example, preservice teachers tended to respond to a given question at approximately the same rate as inservice teachers. A trend was noted, however, from the first group of questions (how much is the statement like you?) to the second group of questions (to what degree do you agree or disagree with each statement?); similar response patterns existed for individual questions. In other words, those statements that received high percentages in the first group of questions also received high percentages in the second group of questions. This is a logical finding since most teacher tend to try and serve as role models who “practice what they preach.” Figure 1 shows a comparison of “Very Much Like Me” and “Like Me” responses on the first group of questions with “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” responses on the second group of questions.

Figure 1 Comparison of Responses to "Like Me" and "Agree With" Statements



Problems Court Session

We shared the results of the pilot study with the participants at a Problems Court Session at the 1998 American Reading Forum Conference. We hoped to gain additional insights into the viability and usefulness of the Reader’s Bill of Rights by dialoguing with conference participants

about the various statements, the findings of the pilot study, and their personal responses to the survey. In addition, we hoped to get feedback on the design and focus of the survey itself, as well as suggestions about future research.

Session organizers took notes on participants' comments and suggestions. In addition, participants were encouraged to share their written notes with organizers, which several participants did. This information was analyzed to identify patterns, and the following discussion highlights major issues which arose during the Problems Court Session.

The participants supported the idea of a Reader's Bill of Rights for several reasons. They felt it provided a tool to help teachers identify and reflect on their beliefs about reading and readers. One participant described the Reader's Bill of Rights as "an invitation to discuss reading," and several participants indicated that they would use it as a discussion tool in their literacy education courses. Another participant stated that she could use the Reader's Bill of Rights to help students write and reflect on their own literacy autobiographies.

The participants noted that many of the statements addressed motivational issues which underlie reading instruction and success. Furthermore, they discussed the voluntary nature of reading and the complex dimensions of reading. For these reasons, they argued that it is difficult to get a clear picture into the complexity of the respondents' thinking with only the survey instrument. They suggested that conducting follow-up interviews with a randomly selected sample of respondents would allow for a clearer picture of why respondents answered as they did. By combining the quantitative data from the survey with the qualitative data from interviews, trends could be identified and also described. Participants also indicated that findings from follow-up studies would have important implications for policy, curriculum, and classroom teaching.

Implications for the Reader's Bill of Rights Survey and Future Research

Problems Court Participants suggested restructuring the survey instrument so it clarified the intent of the two sets of statements. Consensus was reached that the first set of questions should focus on what the respondent does as a reader, and this could be stated, "As a reader, I believe I have the right..." For the second set of questions, participants indicated that the focus should be on the rights that students have. This could be stated, "As a teacher, I believe my students have the right..."

Participants suggested that gathering additional demographic data about respondents would provide a clearer picture of trends in responses. For example, knowing the teachers' grade levels, numbers of years teaching, and subject areas might provide insights into similarities and differences among the various groups. In addition, participants supported the idea that broadening the survey to include the general public would provide information about how those outside of education think about reader's rights. For the general public, the second set of questions could focus on asking "to what degree should schools/teachers give students the right to..." Parents could also be included in the survey to gain information on their beliefs. In addition, participants suggested including children from the intermediate through high school grade levels to provide insights into students' beliefs about reading and reader's rights.

Participants also suggested that surveying educators who were enrolled in courses may have skewed responses toward what they thought the researchers, who were also their professors,

wanted to hear. Including teachers who are not enrolled in courses could help to provide a broader and clearer picture of teachers' responses to the Reader's Bill of Rights.

Other suggestions included asking respondents to explain why they rated the statements as they did to provide qualitative data to complement the quantitative data gathered from the survey. In addition, including information on responses in terms of narrative or expository texts was also suggested as a way of getting at the different approaches and beliefs that teachers and students have about reading different types of texts.

Lingering Questions and Issues

Some lingering questions and issues related to the Reader's Bill of Rights remain after the pilot study and the Problems Court. For example, why did 35% of the preservice and inservice teachers surveyed indicate that the right to not read was "very much like me" or "like me?" Does this mean that they don't identify themselves as readers? Can and should teacher education programs address this issue, and if so, how would they do so? We wondered if all readers are entitled to the same rights regardless of reading proficiency or age? Furthermore, we questioned if all of the rights serve in the best interest of the individual or society? While we don't have answers to these important questions, we offer them as challenges to ourselves and all literacy practitioners and researchers. With ongoing dialogue, reflection, and future research, we hope to gain greater insights into the rights and responsibilities of readers.

Conclusions

The authors plan to undertake a broader study which includes teachers at all levels, students, parents, and members of the general public. The survey is currently being redesigned to incorporate suggestions from the Problems Court Session. The findings from the pilot study, coupled with the responses during the Problems Court Session, indicate that the Reader's Bill of Rights is a valuable tool for promoting discussion and reflection about teaching, learning, and reading. As we seek to help teachers become reflective practitioners and students to become aware of their learning and reading processes, the Reader's Bill of Rights holds much promise for helping teachers and learners further their understanding of reading and readers. Furthermore, as educators seek to provide learning opportunities for all students in the spirit of democratic education, the central issue of rights and responsibilities is critical. The authors believe the Reader's Bill of Rights can serve as a useful tool to help educators examine, debate, and address readers' rights in schools and in teacher education programs.

References

- Beane, J.A. (1998). Reclaiming a democratic purpose for education. *Educational Leadership* 56(2), 8-11.
- Fleischer, C., & Schaafsma, D. (Eds.). (1998). *Literacy and democracy*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Panofsky, C.P. (1998, Dec.). *Getting to the heart of the matter: Literacy as value commitments*. Paper presented at the Nineteenth Annual Conference of the American Reading Forum, Sanibel Island, FL.

Pennac, D. (1994). *Better than life*. Toronto: Coach House Press.

Appendix A

Reader's Bill of Rights Survey